

## **“A SIMPLE SUCKING OF THE TEETH”: BECKETT, DANTE AND THE “*RISUS PURUS*”**

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Samuel Beckett’s “Dante postcards” record the first three smiles to be found in the *Purgatorio*. In doing so, Beckett draws attention to a gesture that has recently received significant critical attention within Dante studies. These postcards suggest Beckett’s alertness to the complexity of face to face encounters within the *Commedia*, while also providing an opportunity to consider the extent to which facial expressions are significant within Beckett’s own writing. In this essay, I argue that the postcards can be read alongside Beckett’s early novels, in particular *Murphy* (English 1938, French 1947) and *Watt* (English 1953, French 1968). Moreover, I explore the extent to which Beckett’s readings of Dante are multifaceted in that they demonstrate the extent to which he was both inspired by, and yet also at odds with, his Italian predecessor.

Keywords: Samuel Beckett, Dante, Face, Smile, Communication

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Samuel Beckett’s “Dante postcards”, which are held at Reading University Library, are clear evidence of his close and recurrent readings of the *Commedia*.<sup>1</sup> These postcards consist of three undated, loose cards on which Beckett made some brief, handwritten notes. These notes include line-referenced quotations from the first five *canti* of the *Purgatorio*, Beckett’s

<sup>1</sup> “Dante postcards”, RUL, MS 4123. See also *Beckett at Reading: Catalogue of the Beckett Manuscript Collection at The University of Reading*, ed. by Bryden, Garforth and Peter (The University of Reading: Whiteknights Press and the Beckett Foundation). Dante’s significance to Beckett has been explored by a number of scholars, including in particular Daniella Caselli in *Beckett’s Dantes: Intertextuality in the fiction and criticism* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2005).

own observations regarding the structure of the *Commedia*, and some extracts from an unattributed Italian commentary. They also record the first three smiles in the *Purgatorio*, and in doing so they bear witness to the tantalizing fact that smiles were a particular feature of Dante's writing that had caught his attention.

Indeed, the sharpness of Beckett's reading is corroborated by the scholars to have since argued that, within the *Commedia*, Dante transforms the smile into a key component of his poetic vocabulary.<sup>2</sup> This gesture is a site of precisely the kind of interpersonal acceptance and resistance to which both authors were sensitive. The first smile noted by Beckett is that of Dante's old friend, Casella, in *Purgatorio* 2. Upon recognizing Casella, we are told that Dante advances to embrace him but that their embrace proves to be impossible (*Purg.* 2. 79-81):

Oi ombre vane, fuor che ne l'aspetto!  
tre volte dietro a lei le mani avvinsi,  
e tante mi tornai con esse al petto.

It is Dante's wonder at their failure to embrace that causes Casella to smile: "Di maraviglia, credo, mi dipinsi; / per che l'ombra sorrise e si ritrasse." (*Purg.* 2. 82-83) In this moment, Casella reads and interprets the expression on Dante's face, in turn responding with a complex communicative gesture of his

<sup>2</sup> *Sorriso/sorridere* and *riso/ridere* are used interchangeably throughout the *Commedia*. See Hawkins, "All Smiles: Poetry and Theology in Dante" in *Dante's Commedia: Theology as Poetry*, eds. Montemaggi and Treherne. Claudia Villa discusses the connections between Horace, ineffability and smiles in the *Paradiso*. Villa, "Il problema dello stile umile (e il riso di Dante)" in *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet*, ed. Barański and McLaughlin (Oxford: Legenda, 2010). Finally, see also Heather Webb, *Dante's Persons: An Ethics of the Transhuman* (Oxford: OUP, 2016).

own: his smile simultaneously suggests recognition, intimacy and amusement at his friend's confusion.

The second smile noted by Beckett occurs a *canto* later and is that of Manfred, the son of Emperor Frederick II. Manfred initially offers his wounds as identifying marks, before smiling ("Poi sorridendo") and naming himself: "Io son Manfredi." (*Purg.* 3. 111) Dante presents Manfred as an unusually attractive nobleman and in the postcards Beckett quotes from an unattributed critical work, which emphasises that "Manfredi è l'unico personaggio che Dante descrive nei suoi particolari felici mittendone in risalto la straordinaria bellezza." Beckett then copies a line from *Purgatorio* 3: "biondo era e bello e di gentile aspetto." (*Purg.* 3. 107) Crucially, the smiles of both Casella and Manfred occur when attention is drawn to the bodies of the purgatorial shades, while the smiles themselves act as modes of communication between individuals: Casella's smile communicates amusement at Dante's confusion as well as recognition of his friend, while Manfred's expression is the reassuring smile of a stranger forming a social connection and perhaps also contains a hint of wry amusement at Dante's initial failure to recognize him.

The third and final smile referenced by Beckett in his postcards is that of Dante himself, who smiles when he sees Belacqua seated beneath a rock midway up Mount Purgatory. Mary Bryden describes this smile as being prompted "both by the sudden recognition of his lutemaker friend and by a spontaneous amusement at his languid leg-pulling."<sup>3</sup> This smile is remarkable because it is, as Beckett notes in the postcards, "D's 1<sup>st</sup> smile,"

<sup>3</sup> Bryden, "Beckett and the Three Dantean Smiles" in *Journal of Beckett Studies*, vol. 4: 2 (London: Calder, 1995), p. 31.

or as he will put it later in *Compagnie / Company* (1980), “Dante’s first quarter-smile.”<sup>4</sup> Following his encounters with Casella and Manfred, Dante’s “quarter-smile” is a sign that he has once again become able to respond to other individuals with an expressive reciprocity and openness beyond the less delicate, and as Virgil makes clear in *Inferno* 20, less appropriate, expressions of pity presented in Hell.<sup>5</sup>

As mentioned above, Beckett’s “Dante postcards” are undated, and as such a degree of tentativeness is necessary when drawing specific texts into their orbit. At the same time, Beckett’s note-taking habits were particularly concentrated throughout the 1930s, and both John Pilling and Matthew Feldman have demonstrated the interconnectedness between Beckett’s notes and the texts written in this period.<sup>6</sup> With this in mind, and without attempting to pin a specific date to the postcards, this essay suggests that the notes were taken early in Beckett’s career, most likely in the mid-1930s, and that they were influential in shaping the issues examined in two of his early

<sup>4</sup> Beckett, *Company* (London: Calder, 1980, repr. 2003), p. 85.

<sup>5</sup> See *Inf.* 5. 139-142 and *Inf.* 20. 25-27.

<sup>6</sup> See *The Ideal Core of the Onion: Reading Beckett Archives*, ed. by Pilling and Bryden (Reading: Beckett International Foundation, 1992) and Pilling’s article “Dates and Difficulties, Beckett’s *Whoroscope* Notebook,” in *Beckett the European*, ed. by Van Hulle (Tallahassee, Florida: Journal of Beckett Studies Books, 2005). See also Feldman’s *Beckett’s Books: A Cultural History of Samuel Beckett’s ‘Interwar Notes’* (London; New York: Continuum, 2006, repr. 2008) and *Samuel Beckett: Debts and Legacies*, ed. by Tønning, Feldman, Engelberts, van Hulle (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi, 2010)

novels: *Murphy* (English 1938, French 1947) and *Watt* (English 1953, French 1968). Both of these texts pay considerable attention to faces and facial expressions, reflecting upon a number of the questions posed implicitly by the postcards.

On the second page of *Murphy*, there is an account of the eponymous hero's farewell from Neary, a man under whom he "had lately studied":

"Murphy, all life is figure and ground."

"But a wandering to find home," said Murphy.

"The face," said Neary, "or system of faces, against the big blooming buzzing confusion. I think of Miss Dwyer."<sup>7</sup>

John Fletcher places Neary's assertion that "all life is figure and ground" in the context of pre-Socratic philosophy,<sup>8</sup> but James Acheson more convincingly argues that Neary's contribution to the exchange is based on the work of "two famous psychologists, Edgar Rubin and William James."<sup>9</sup> By arguing that "all life is figure and ground," Neary alludes to Rubin's argument that "we make sense of sense data by distinguishing perceptually between 'the figure, the substantial appearance of objects, and the ground, the [...] environment in which [objects are] placed'".<sup>10</sup> As such, Neary claims that what we see in "life" depends on the way in which we see; each individual attempts to make sense of the world by distinguishing between an object and its surroundings,

<sup>7</sup> Beckett, *Murphy* (London: Calder, 1963, repr. 1993), p. 6.

<sup>8</sup> Fletcher, 'Samuel Beckett and the Philosophers' in *Comparative Literature*, vol.17: 1 (Winter, 1965), p. 43.

<sup>9</sup> Acheson, 'Murphy's Metaphysics', in *The Beckett Studies Reader*, ed. S.E. Gontarski (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1993), p. 80.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. Acheson is quoting Robert I. Watson, *The Great Psychologists: From Aristotle to Freud*, (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott, 1968), p. 439.

by deciding what to focus on amidst the confusion.

Murphy's reply to Neary could be heard as a qualification, so that "all life" may well be "figure and ground" except for "a wandering to find home," or it may be an alternative conclusion to the formulation "all life is," implying that for Murphy "all life is [...]. But a wandering to find home," that is, "all life" is nothing more than a "wandering to find home." In either case, this is an admission of dislocation: the one definite truth for Murphy is that "all life" consists of a search for "home." Neary's response to Murphy's assertion can be heard either as a dismissal, so that Neary ignores Murphy as he continues with his own train of thought, or as a further nuancing, so that Neary suggests "home" is in fact the "face" or "system of faces." By changing our perspectives, Neary may imply, it is possible to render the "face" or "system of faces" a point (or points) of orientation "against" the "big blooming buzzing confusion" in the background.

Neary's emphasis on the "face" may provide an alternative to the solipsism and self-love in which Murphy indulges throughout the novel.<sup>11</sup> In doing so, Neary calls to mind the later work of Emmanuel Levinas, of whom Robert Gordon writes: "the roots of the ethical lie in the encounter between two people, each looking at the other, acknowledging and recognizing the other, in particular acknowledging the 'otherness' of the other." Gordon continues: "Two subjects enter the realm of the ethical in the act of facing each other, of facing up to each other and their own ethical subjecthood, of asking for a mark of the self in the

<sup>11</sup> See in particular Chapter 6 of *Murphy*, on Murphy's mind, which includes the epigraph: "*Amor intellectualis quo Murphy se ipsum amat.*" Beckett, *Murphy*, p.63. This phrase has its origins in the writings of both Spinoza and Geulincx. See Fletcher, 'Samuel Beckett and the Philosophers', p. 54.

other and vice versa: what Levinas calls the ‘face to face’”.<sup>12</sup> This “‘face to face’” encounter is a forceful summoning, indeed it is a summoning “prior to ontology and thus prior to the very foundations of the Western philosophical tradition and its notion of the self.”<sup>13</sup>

For Levinas, thought “alert to the face of the other” is the “thought of irreducible difference,” and this awareness of alterity is so radical that it demands both a response and an acknowledgement of responsibility.<sup>14</sup> In *Éthique comme philosophie première*, Levinas argues that “C’est précisément dans ce rappel de ma responsabilité par le visage qui m’assigne, qui me demande, qui me réclame, c’est dans cette mise en question qu’autrui est prochain.”<sup>15</sup> The progression in Levinas’s sentence from a summoning, to a call and finally a plaintive request (“qui me réclame”) emphasises the complexity of this encounter, the extent to which it is double-sided, uncertain and yet at the same time irreducible.

For Neary, the “face” or “system of faces” is mentioned with Miss Dwyer in mind and the conversation between the two men develops into a discussion about love, and then Murphy’s apparent incapacity to love. Neary admits that “To gain the affections of Miss Dwyer [...] would benefit me no end,” to which Murphy retorts: “And then? [...] Back to Tenerife and the

<sup>12</sup> Gordon, *Primo Levi’s Ordinary Virtues: From Testimony to Ethics* (Oxford: OUP, 2001), p. 40.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

<sup>14</sup> Levinas, ‘Beyond Intentionality’, *Philosophy in France Today*, ed. Alan Montefiore (Cambridge: CUP, 1983), p. 108.

<sup>15</sup> Levinas, *Éthique comme philosophie première*, préfacé et annoté par Jacques Rolland (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1998), p. 97.

apes?”<sup>16</sup> In preparing his psychology notes while living in London between December 1933 and December 1935, Beckett read both Robert Woodworth’s *Contemporary Schools of Psychology* (1931) and Wolfgang Köhler’s *The Mentality of Apes* (1927), making notes on Köhler’s experiments with apes in Tenerife between 1913 and 1917.<sup>17</sup> In mentioning “Tenerife and the apes,” Murphy refers to Köhler’s experiments, which led, as Shane Weller explains, to Köhler challenging “E. L. Thorndike’s argument that, unlike human beings, ‘Animals learn, neither by reasoning nor by imitation, but by trial and error’”:

In his *The Mentality of Apes* (1917; English translation, 1925), Köhler addresses the question of “whether the chimpanzee, representing probably the most intelligent group of subhuman animals, showed any genuine intelligence” (Woodworth 142). His conclusion is that in fact apes learn not simply through “trial and error” (transcribed by Beckett as “trial and terror”) but also through “insight.”

There is an irony in Murphy’s choice of reference because, as Weller goes on to observe, “for Köhler, the strict Cartesian distinction between human and animal is simply untenable.”<sup>18</sup> Murphy attempts to maintain a split between body and mind, to

<sup>16</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 7.

<sup>17</sup> Woodworth, *Contemporary School’s of Psychology* (London: Methuen, 1931); Köhler, *The Mentality of Apes* (2<sup>nd</sup> rev. ed. London: K. Paul Trench, Trübner & Co., 1927). See TCD MS 10971/7 and 10971/8. These notes are dated between December 1933 and December 1935, which was when Beckett began writing *Murphy*. See also *Notes Diverse Holo: Catalogues of Beckett’s reading notes and other manuscripts at Trinity College Dublin*, ed. Matthijs Engelberts and Everett Frost (Amsterdam; New York: Rodopi Press, 2006), pp. 158-66.

<sup>18</sup> Weller, ‘Not Rightly Human: Beckett and Animality’ in *Borderless Beckett / Beckett sans frontières: Tokyo 2006* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2008), p. 216.



seek refuge in his “little world” by appeasing his body and avoiding the “big world,” and yet at the same time he also cites a text (whether consciously or not) that disputes the claims of Descartes.<sup>19</sup>

Nevertheless, the primary sense in which Murphy refers to the apes is to compare Neary’s desire for Miss Dwyer to an ape’s desire for a banana, which in turn casts doubt upon the wider, metaphysical significance of love:

Of such was Neary’s love for Miss Dwyer, who loved a Flight-Lieutenant Elliman, who loved a Miss Farren of Ringsakiddy, who loved a Father Fitt of Ballinclashet, who in all sincerity was bound to acknowledge a certain vocation for a Mrs West of Passage, who loved Neary.

“Love requited,” said Neary, “is a short circuit,” a ball that gave rise to a sparkling rally.

“The love that lifts up its eyes,” said Neary, “being in torment; that craves for the tip of her little finger, dipped in lacquer, to cool its tongue - is foreign to you, Murphy, I take it.”

“Greek,” said Murphy.

“Or put it another way,” said Neary; “the single, brilliant, organized compact blotch in the tumult of heterogeneous stimulation.”

“Blotch is the word,” said Murphy.

“Just so,” said Neary. “Now pay attention to this. For whatever reason you cannot love - But there is a Miss Counihan, Murphy, is there not?”<sup>20</sup>

The “blotch” referred to by Neary might be a face set against the background of “heterogeneous stimulation,” while Murphy’s attentiveness to Neary’s terms (“Blotch is the word”) emphasises

<sup>19</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 101.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

his own reluctance to engage in such messy, interpersonal encounters. Murphy agrees that love as described by Neary is foreign to him (“Greek”) and Neary concludes by acknowledging that for “whatever reason,” Murphy “cannot love.” In fact, he seems to prove as much by asking Murphy “to define let us say your commerce with this Miss Counihan.” Murphy replies, “Precordial [...] rather than cordial. Tired. Cork County. Depraved.” Neary acknowledges that Murphy’s “heart is as it is,” musing that his “conarium” or pineal gland may well have “shrunk to nothing,”<sup>21</sup> the “conarium” being for Descartes the point of connection between body and mind and so, as Descartes puts it himself, the “principle seat of the soul.”<sup>22</sup> In Neary’s view, the connection between Murphy’s body and mind has been utterly severed, while he may also be implying (depending on how well he knows his Descartes) that Murphy is literally soulless.

Yet Neary’s question regarding Miss Counihan is the correct one. For while Murphy may have no feelings for Miss Counihan, he is not without feelings altogether: “The part of him that he hated craved for Celia, the part that he loved shriveled up at the thought of her. The voice lamented faintly against his flesh.”<sup>23</sup> In contrast to Neary’s suggestion, Murphy’s “conarium” cannot have “shrunk to nothing”; his mind and body remain in tension, his consciousness (“voice”) lamenting “faintly against his flesh.” A little later, Celia discovers Murphy tied to his chair but now with “the rocking-chair [...] on top”:

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., p. 8.

<sup>22</sup> This phrase is taken from a letter that Descartes wrote on 29<sup>th</sup> January 1640. Descartes, *The Philosophical Writings of Descartes, Vol. III: The Correspondence*, trans. Cottingham, Stoothoff, Murdoch, Kenny (Cambridge: CUP, 1991). p. 143.

<sup>23</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 10.

“Who are you?” said Murphy. Celia mentioned her name. Murphy, unable to believe his ears, opened his eyes. The beloved features emerging from chaos were the face against the big blooming buzzing confusion of which Neary had spoken so highly. He closed his eyes and opened his arms. She sank down athwart his breast, their heads were side by side on the pillow but facing opposite ways, his fingers strayed through her yellow hair. It was the short circuit so earnestly desired by Neary, the flare of pursuit and flight extinguished.<sup>24</sup>

In Murphy’s terms, Celia’s “beloved features” emerge “from chaos,” and he goes on to acknowledge the equivalence of this experience with Neary’s earlier description: the “beloved features emerging from the chaos were the face against the big blooming buzzing confusion of which Neary had spoken so highly.” Despite his own resistance, Murphy has found a ‘figure’ (Celia’s face) against the ‘ground’ (the ‘chaos’).

It would seem then that an individual might orientate herself amidst the chaos of experience by attending closely to the faces of others. However, such attention is not straightforwardly positive; rather it contains a “mixture” of responses, much as Beckett himself described when outlining his own attitude to Murphy: “the mixture of compassion, patience, mockery and ‘tat twam asi.’”<sup>25</sup> A look of exactly this kind occurs when Celia encounters Miss Carridge:

A long look of fellow-feeling filled the space between them, with calm, pity and a touch of contempt. They leaned against it as against

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., pp. 20-1.

<sup>25</sup> The phrase ‘tat twam asi’ is from Sanskrit, meaning ‘That thou art’. Beckett, *The Letters of Samuel Beckett: 1929-1940*, vol. I., ed. Fehsenfeld, Overbeck (Cambridge: CUP, 2009), p. 350. See also note 3 on p. 353.

a solid wall of wool and looked at each other across it. Then they continued on their ways, Miss Carridge down what stairs remained, Celia into their old room.<sup>26</sup>

The look shared by Miss Carridge and Celia is simultaneously a look of acceptance and resistance. The sympathetic act of “fellow-feeling” exchanged between these women does not consist of a look of pure pity but rather is mingled with a “touch of contempt.” There is something supportive about the “wall of wool” against which they lean, something soft and comforting, and yet it is also divisive, indistinct, “solid.”

Discussing individuals and individualism in the *Inferno*, Robin Kirkpatrick and George Corbett describe the “paradoxical state in which the self exiles itself from self precisely by self-absorption,” which fits Murphy’s self-love precisely.<sup>27</sup> David Tucker observes that Murphy’s “egotistical self-regard will get the better of him and when his own little inferno engulfs him it will be while he is in thrall to himself and his self-defeating attempts to will his own quietist will-lessness.”<sup>28</sup> In the *Purgatorio*, in contrast to such “self-absorption,” there is suddenly an abundance of reciprocated facial expressions, and Kirkpatrick has drawn attention to the implications of such expressive detail, arguing that the body in Dante’s *Purgatorio* becomes, “as the Talmudic philosopher Emmanuel Levinas

<sup>26</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 71.

<sup>27</sup> Kirkpatrick and Corbett, “Language, Narrative and Ethics” in *Dante the Lyric and Ethical Poet*, p. 59.

<sup>28</sup> Tucker, “Murphy, Geulincx and an Occasional(ist) Game of Chess” in *The Tragic Comedy of Samuel Beckett: ‘Beckett in Rome’*, 17-19 April 2008 (Università Studi di Roma «Tor Vergata»: Editori Laterza, 2009), p. 203.

would have it, all face.”<sup>29</sup> In turn, this face-fullness is grounded “in the expressive reciprocations of face recognizing face.”<sup>30</sup>

The point of transition in the *Commedia* between infernal self-absorption and purgatorial reciprocity is clear. At the end of *Purgatorio* 1, Dante’s face is washed by Virgil (*Purg.* 1. 126-129):

ond’io, che fui accorto di sua arte,  
porsi ver lui le guance lagrimose:  
ivi mi fece tutto scoperto  
quel color che l’inferno mi nascose.

By removing the dust and tears from Dante’s face, Virgil washes away traces of the *Inferno*, and through this tender and intimate act he rejuvenates Dante in preparation for the journey to come. To borrow Bryden’s phrase, the atmosphere of the Ante-Purgatory will incorporate “both light and shade, grief and cheerfulness,”<sup>31</sup> and the emotional and physical qualities of this recognizably terrestrial setting are expressed largely through a renewed emphasis on bodies, in particular Dante’s miraculously solid body,<sup>32</sup> but also the physical forms of the shades he meets as he ascends the mountain. As such, it is clear that Beckett was alert to the “mixture” to be discerned in Dante’s purgatorial faces, to the extent to which the “muscular dialogue generated by gesture” might include a variety of possible emotions and

<sup>29</sup> Kirkpatrick and Corbett, “Language, Narrative and Ethics,” p. 59.

<sup>30</sup> Kirkpatrick, “Dante and the Body” in *Framing Medieval Bodies*, eds. Kay and Rubin (Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994), p. 247.

<sup>31</sup> Bryden, “Beckett and the Three Dantean Smiles”, p. 31.

<sup>32</sup> See, for instance, *Purg.* 3. 91-3.

meanings.<sup>33</sup> And in this respect, Beckett was also aware of a fundamental problem, also implicit but not developed in the moments noted in the *Purgatorio*: if face to face encounters offer an ethical alternative to solipsism and isolation, then they are also precarious, fraught with potential misunderstanding and achieved against the odds.

In *Watt*, Arthur describes the academic committee before whom Louit must present his findings, elaborately outlining the series of incomplete “looks” passed between the members of the committee by explaining that “many, many looks may still be taken, and much, much time still lost, ere every eye find the eye it seeks, and into every mind the energy flow, the comfort and the reassurance, necessary for a resumption of the business in hand.” A reciprocated look enables “energy” to “flow”, and such energy is both a “comfort” and a “reassurance,” but “of the five times eight or forty looks taken, not one” is “reciprocated.”<sup>34</sup> Following the meeting, Arthur describes the committee members leaving the room, followed by Louit and Mr. Nackybal:

And soon after Mr. Nackybal put on his outer clothes and went away. And soon after Louit went away. And Louit, going down the stairs, met the bitter stout porter Power coming up. And as they passed the porter raised his cap and Louit smiled. And they did well. For had not Louit smiled, then Power had not raised his cap, and had not Power raised his cap, then Louit had not smiled, but they had passed, each on his way, Louit down, Power up, the one unsmiling, and the other covered.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>33</sup> In 1931, while lecturing on Molière at Trinity College Dublin, Beckett emphasized “muscular dialogue generated by gesture.” Knowlson, *Damned to Fame: The Life of Samuel Beckett* (London: Bloomsbury, 1996, repr. 1997), p. 56.

<sup>34</sup> Beckett, *Watt* (London: Calder, 1963, repr. 1998), p. 177.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 196.

The comedy in this passage is created through the way in which Arthur reduces the incident to the barest of facts, while also suggesting that, logically, Louit and the porter Power could easily not have responded to one another. Each act is dependent upon the other happening, which in turn draws our attention to the unlikelihood of simultaneous reciprocity. Reciprocity of this kind is undoubtedly valuable (“And they did well”) but, in the context of Beckett’s writing, successful, communicative interactions such as those described in the opening *canti* of the *Purgatorio* are most likely accidental, the result of two individuals each happening to find a “figure” against the “ground.”<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, the difficulty of expressive reciprocity is such that even if the problem of timing is overcome, the communication of meaning cannot be relied upon. In *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* (1992), the narrator describes Lucien’s strange, indirect manner of speaking (“he did not talk *at* a person, he just balladed around at his own sweet aboulia”), and we are then provided with a brief example of such speech:

“A passage in Liebnitz” he said “where he compares matter to a garden of flowers and every corpuscle of every fish another pool of fish ...” he essayed the gesture and smiled, a drowned smile, “gave me the impression that Æsthetics were a branch of philosophy.”<sup>37</sup>

Lucien must “essay” the gesture, by which the narrator means try

<sup>36</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, p. 6.

<sup>37</sup> Beckett, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women*, ed. O’Brien and Fournier (London: Calder, 1993), p. 47. Despite being written in the early 1930s, *Dream of Fair to Middling Women* was not published until 1992.

or attempt, and the result is an undoubted failure: “a drowned smile.” The narrator goes on to describe the smile as “terrible, as though seen through water,” and claims that on the one hand “Belacqua wanted to sponge it away,” while on the other Lucien “would not abandon the gesture that had broken down and now could never be made to mean anything.” The smile is essential to Lucien, he “would not abandon it,” but it is meaningless, and its effect on Belacqua is to render him uncomfortable enough to want to erase it.

Similarly, at the beginning of *Watt* we learn that “Watt had watched people smile and thought he understood how it was done”:

And it was true that Watt’s smile, when he smiled, resembled more a smile than a sneer, for example, or a yawn. But there was something wanting to Watt’s smile, some little thing was lacking, and people who saw it for the first time, and most people who saw it saw it for the first time, were sometimes in doubt as to what expression exactly was intended. To many it seemed a simple sucking of the teeth.

This passage is concluded with a further, single sentence paragraph which informs us that “Watt used this smile sparingly.”<sup>38</sup> Watt cannot imbue his smile with meaning in the way that Manfred does in *Purgatorio* 3. Watching others smile, no matter how attentively, is not enough for Watt to master the gesture himself, and the result is that, more often than not, the people who witness Watt’s smile are left confused. Watt’s tendency to pull faces at strangers is an example of “la plus intense drôlerie” noticed by Badiou in Beckett’s writing; the act

<sup>38</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, p. 23.



is funny, but it is also disconcerting, an example of the subject's dislocation from the external world.<sup>39</sup>

In fact, we learn a little later that Watt's smile at times even communicates the opposite message to that intended. Having sat down in a compartment of a train, Watt notices "a large gentleman sitting in the corner diagonally opposed to his." This man introduces himself ("My name is Spiro") and we are informed that Watt is pleased that, in Mr. Spiro, he has finally met a "sensible man" who begins with the "essential and then, working on, would deal with the less important matters, one after the other, in an orderly way." In order to reflect his pleasure at this good sense, the narrator tells us that "Watt smiled," and there is a beat as we move to the next line where we learn the effect of Watt's smile: "No offence meant, said Mr. Spiro".<sup>40</sup> In this moment, Beckett demonstrates both Watt's solitude (he cannot communicate with Mr. Spiro), as well as the futility of hermetic language (the communicative failure is a result of the particularity of Watt's facial expression). In the "Verticalist Manifesto" that Beckett signed in 1932, the signatories attested to their willingness to "go so far as to invent a hermetic language, if necessary."<sup>41</sup> By the time he writes *Watt*, Beckett embodies the ugliness and painful loneliness of such a language in the gestural failures of his protagonist.

At the end of the novel, when Watt is about to leave Mr. Knott's house, Watt's face is said to become "gradually of such vacancy that Micks, raising in amaze an astonished hand to a thunderstruck mouth, recoiled to the wall, and there stood, in a

<sup>39</sup> Badiou, *Beckett: L'Incrévable désir* (Paris: Hachette, 1995), p. 74.

<sup>40</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, p. 25.

<sup>41</sup> Macmillan, *Transition 1927-38: History of a Literary Era* (London: John Calder, 1975), p. 66.

crouching posture, his back pressed against the wall, and the back of the one hand pressed against his parted lips.” Close attention to Watt’s face renders Micks “astonished” and “thunderstruck” in such a surprising fashion that the narrator even suggests it “may have been something else”:

[I]t is hard to believe that the face of Watt, dreadful and all as it was at the time, was dreadful and all enough to cause a powerful lymphatic man like Micks to recoil to the wall with his hands to his face, as if to ward off a blow, or press back a cry, in the way he did, and to turn pale, for he turned pale, very properly.<sup>42</sup>

Despite the narrator’s misgivings, the reader is in little doubt that the cause of Micks’s reaction is Watt’s face, as the narrator himself partly acknowledges by noting that his face turned pale “very properly,” and so to speak, understandably. This instance of close attention results neither in a social connection nor an ethical relation to the other, but rather amazement, fear and paralysis.

In witnessing the vacancy of Watt’s expression, Micks comes, quite literally, face to face with the strangeness of humanity, which is to say, our capacity to become unrecognizable to one another. There is a similarly disconcerting moment towards the end of *Murphy*. Following their game of chess, Murphy helps Mr Endon to bed. In doing so, Murphy looks long into his opponent’s eyes, bringing his face so close to Mr Endon’s face that they almost touch. Peter Boxall writes:

Murphy positions himself right in front of Mr Endon - we are told that he “took Mr Endon’s head in his hands and brought the

<sup>42</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, p. 219.

eyes to bear on his, or rather his on them, across a narrow gulf of air, the merest hand's breadth of air" (Beckett, 1973, 139) - and as he gazes into Mr Endon's empty eyes, the focus of the narrative is on the surface of the eyeball itself, the threshold which negotiates the contact between the minds of Murphy and Mr Endon. "Approaching his eyes still nearer," the narrative goes on, Murphy focuses with intensity on the eyeball, discovering not ingress to the other, but rather a reflected version of himself, finding "in the cornea, horribly reduced, obscured and distorted, his own image" (Beckett, 1973, 140). The reflective surface of Mr Endon's eye [...] signals the impenetrability of the threshold of vision, its impassability.<sup>43</sup>

There is no way through the material surface of Mr Endon's eye, and no way of accessing his mind. The "narrow gulf of air," small enough to suggest a "butterfly kiss" between the two men, is still too large.<sup>44</sup> And yet a connection is made. In seeing himself "blindly reflected in Mr Endon's eye," Murphy finds himself "at home within the solipsism of the other."

By becoming a "speck in Mr Endon's unseen," Murphy crosses the "gulf," but as Boxall argues, this is "only because that wall is so glassily intact, only because this *becoming* other is also a peculiarly radical distancing *from* the other."<sup>45</sup> To return to Robert Gordon's phrase, he finds, quite literally, "a mark of the self in the other," but that mark is dependent upon inescapable isolation.<sup>46</sup> Levinas articulates this two-way movement in "Beyond Intentionality" by exclaiming, "A brother despite my

<sup>43</sup> Boxall, "The Threshold of Vision: The Animal Gaze in Beckett, Coetzee and Sebald," *Journal of Beckett Studies*, volume 20: 2 (2011), p. 133.

<sup>44</sup> Beckett, *Murphy*, pp. 139-40.

<sup>45</sup> Boxall, "The Threshold of Vision," p. 136.

<sup>46</sup> Gordon, *Primo Levi's Ordinary Virtues*, p. 40.

strangeness!”<sup>47</sup> Murphy’s strangeness, his alterity to Mr Endon, is absolute, but in that alterity he discovers a kind of brotherhood.

In the *Commedia*, Dante demonstrates remarkable subtlety in his handling of face to face encounters; a later example from the *Purgatorio* would be Dante’s own smile at Statius’ praise for Virgil, which is powerful in its simultaneous communication of human awkwardness, amusement and generosity (*Purg.* 21. 109). Reflecting upon Dante’s work, Beckett stresses in both *Murphy* and *Watt* that it is too easy to suggest that we build ethical connections simply by looking closely at the faces of others. Every look runs the risk of misunderstanding, while each smile or laugh contains a “mixture of compassion, patience [and] mockery.”<sup>48</sup> However, Dante’s poem does insist increasingly upon the possibility that alterity might be transformed into perfect community, so that by the time Dante encounters the souls of the just in *Paradiso*, those individuals are able to speak at once singularly and in unison: “e sonar ne la voce e ‘io’ e ‘mio’, / quand’ era nel concetto e ‘noi’ e ‘nostro’ (*Par.* 19. 11-12). Such perfect community is not possible in Beckett’s writing, and this points to a fundamental difference between the two authors and their understanding of the reality of human experience, which in turn helps to explicate the different kinds of comedy (and so laughter) created.

Having just arrived at Mr Knott’s house, Watt is provided with a “short statement” of advice by the outgoing servant, Arsene, and this piece of advice touches upon the range of different laughs available to an individual in response to the “whacks, the moans, the cracks, the groans, the welts, the

<sup>47</sup> Levinas, ‘Beyond Intentionality’, p. 110.

<sup>48</sup> Beckett, *Letters*, vol. I., p. 350.

squeaks, the belts, the shrieks, the pricks, the prayers, the kicks, the tears, the skelps, and the yelps.”<sup>49</sup> He explains:

Of all the laughs that strictly speaking are not laughs, but modes of ululation, only three I think need detain us, I mean the bitter, the hollow and the mirthless. They correspond to successive, how shall I say successive ... suc ... successive excoriations of the understanding, and the passage from the one to the other is the passage from the lesser to the greater, from the lower to the higher, from the outer to the inner, from the gross to the fine, from the matter to the form. That laugh that now is mirthless once was hollow, the laugh that once was hollow once was bitter. And the laugh that once was bitter? Eyewater, Mr. Watt, eyewater. But do not let us waste our time with that, do not let us waste *any more time* with that, Mr. Watt. No. Where were we? The bitter, the hollow and - haw! haw! - the mirthless. The bitter laugh laughs at that which is not true, it is the intellectual laugh. Not good! Not true! Well well. But the mirthless laugh is the dianoetic laugh, down the snout - haw! - so. It is the laugh of laughs, the *risus purus*, the laugh laughing at the laugh, the beholding, the saluting of the highest joke, in a word the laugh that laughs - silence please - at that which is unhappy.<sup>50</sup>

Arsene does not mention laughter that is joyful. His insistence that there is a progression, along with his refusal to “waste *any more time*” on the laugh that “once was bitter,” implies that such laughter precedes the bitter laugh and as such is no longer worth discussing. The various laughs to which he refers are ways of shrieking or wailing (“modes of ululation”) and they “correspond to successive [...] excoriations of understanding.” They are a kind of epistemological “flaying” in which levels of “understanding”

<sup>49</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, p. 37.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 45-7.

are painfully removed until unhappiness (“that which is unhappy”) is finally beheld.<sup>51</sup>

Arsene’s “*risus purus*” has been read as an attempt to escape suffering by moving beyond intellectual and moral frameworks (“Not good! Not true!”), and in such readings it has been suggested that through laughter it is possible to perceive the human situation more clearly, much as Chaucer’s Troilus does, from the vantage point of the “eighthe spere”,<sup>52</sup> following his death and at the conclusion of *Troilus and Criseyde*: “And in himself he lough right at the wo.”<sup>53</sup> This is how Simon Critchley handles the term in his conclusion to *On Humour*:

For me, it is this smile - deriding the having and the not having, the pleasure and the pain, the sublimity and suffering of the human situation - that is the essence of humour. This is the risus purus, the highest laugh, the laugh that laughs at the laugh, that laughs at that which is unhappy, the mirthless laugh of the epigraph to this book. Yet, this smile does not bring unhappiness, but rather elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation. This is why, melancholy animals that we are, human beings are also the most cheerful. We smile and find ourselves ridiculous. Our wretchedness is our greatness.<sup>54</sup>

It could be that Arsene is suggesting a way of stepping outside or beyond suffering, a way of self-reflexively contemplating unhappiness through a laugh or smile that brings, as Critchley

<sup>51</sup> OED. 1. The action of excoriating; the state of being excoriated: a. the action or process of flaying (a man or beast (obs.)).

<sup>52</sup> Chaucer, *Troilus and Criseyde* in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Benson (Oxford: OUP, 1987, repr. 1988), p. 584, line 1809.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., line 1821.

<sup>54</sup> Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 111.

puts it, “elevation and liberation, the lucidity of consolation.” If this were the case, Arsene would be in good company, for evidence of just such thinking can also be found in the writing of Georges Bataille, who claims in *Le Coupable* (1961) that “Rire de l’univers libérerait ma vie. J’échappe à la pesanteur en riant.”<sup>55</sup>

However, both Bataille and Critchley are in danger of implying that laughter is a means of salvation for humanity, a way of making suffering (or “wretchedness”) bearable. This is particularly the case if too much emphasis is placed on the final sentence of Critchley’s book: “Our wretchedness is our greatness.” In *On Humour* this quotation stands alone and unacknowledged, but in an interview with Shirley Dent, Critchley explains its origins and reasons for inclusion:

It's a quotation from Pascal. I've always been very keen on Pascal, and what I'm most keen on in Pascal is his emphasis upon human wretchedness. He has a phrase which goes something like “Anxiety, boredom and inconstancy, that is the human condition” and I've always been very partial to that. But obviously for Pascal the flip side of that is religious experience, that experience of God that would transform or redeem your wretchedness. I've long wanted to have an occasion to include it in something I wrote and that's why it's there.<sup>56</sup>

Critchley claims that there is a redemptive or transformative “side” to Pascal, a sense in which the wretchedness of humanity can in some way be seen afresh as a cause for celebration. This may be the case for Pascal but it is not so for Beckett. While there may be, as Critchley goes on to argue in the interview, “a black

<sup>55</sup> Bataille, *Le Coupable* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 31.

<sup>56</sup> “Culture Wars” is the reviews website of the *Institute of Ideas* (IOI) in London. The interview can be read here: [www.culturewars.org.uk/2002-12/simoncritchley.htm](http://www.culturewars.org.uk/2002-12/simoncritchley.htm).

sun at the heart of the coloured universe,” and so “something melancholy at the heart of humour,” for Beckett the mixture of melancholia and comedy never permits avoidance of the human reality. There is no means of transcendence, redemption or liberation.

This is apparent in *Watt* if the couple of lines following Arsene’s definition of the “*risus purus*” are included in the discussion. Arsene describes the various laughs, defines the “*risus purus*,” and then states:

Personally of course I regret all. All, all, all. Not a word, not a ----. But have I not been over that already? I have? Then let me speak rather of my present feeling, which so closely resembles the feeling of sorrow, so closely that I can scarcely distinguish between them.<sup>57</sup>

Arsene is consumed with regret (“All, all, all”) and the feeling that he has now is neither sorrow nor happiness, but rather a feeling that “so closely resembles the feeling of sorrow” that he can “scarcely distinguish between them.” His regret collapses the distinction between feelings and leaves him with what he can only describe as that which “resembles” sorrow. Moreover, his awareness of the “*risus purus*” certainly does not permit “elevation,” “liberation” or “the lucidity of consolation.” He is trapped in a repetitive cycle centered around his “regret,” and this “regret” bleeds into his “present feeling”: “But have I not been over that already? I have?”

In *Fin de Partie / Endgame* (French 1957, English 1958), Nell makes a statement similar to that of Arsene, claiming that “Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that.” This phrase is frequently taken out of context and placed all too

<sup>57</sup> Beckett, *Watt*, p. 47.



conveniently alongside Arsene's definition of the "*risus purus*."<sup>58</sup> The dialogue from *Endgame* reads as follows:

- Nell: [Without lowering her voice.] Nothing is funnier than unhappiness, I grant you that. But -  
Nagg: [Shocked.] Oh!  
Nell: Yes, yes, it's the most comical thing in the world. And we laugh, we laugh, with a will, in the beginning. But it's always the same thing. Yes, it's like the funny story we have heard too often, we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more. [Pause.] Have you anything else to say to me? <sup>59</sup>

The "But –" is often omitted by critics in a hurry to simplify Nell's statement. Following Nagg's shocked interruption, Nell describes the hollowing of laughter, the sense in which, while "unhappiness" may be "the most comical thing in the world [...] in the beginning," it becomes "like the funny story we have heard too often": "we still find it funny, but we don't laugh any more." This laughter is neither redemptive nor transformative; it drains away over time, becoming terribly serious as the person laughing realizes that laughter is not pure, that the purity of the "*risus purus*" derives from the object of laughter, from "unhappiness." For Dante, smiles and laughter in the *Paradiso* are ultimately an expression of pure joy at creation, at *our* creation by "l'amor che move il sole e l'altre stelle" (*Par.* 33. 145). In contrast, for Beckett, "unhappiness" and suffering are the bottom line of existence, and our laughter in response is always a complex "mixture" of pleasure and protest, bitterness and regret.

<sup>58</sup> See for example Rolf Breuer, 'Paradox in Beckett', *The Modern Language Review*, vol. 88: 3 (July, 1993), p. 572.

<sup>59</sup> Beckett, *Endgame* in *The Complete Dramatic Works* (London: Faber, 1986, repr. 1990), p. 101.